

Mitra programme evaluation

My initial impression of the Modern International and Transnational History (MITRA) study program, based on the website, was that it embodies professionalism and internationalism, with high aspirations for students' future careers. This presents an attractive option for students seeking an international career underlined by expertise in modern history. A brief view of the program's structure gives students central information concerning the programme and covered topics, showcasing an appealing field term on the 3rd semester.

In this evaluation of MITRA program, my primary aim is to underscore the current practices that help students in reaching the learning outcomes. I will also discuss some challenges, of which most were discussed in the self-evaluation. I attempt to offer suggestions for the staff to consider.

The evaluation is based on the given material, mainly the self-evaluation report from 2022, programme page and course pages. I've had to lean on the self-evaluation to gain insight on how students and staff experience the strengths and weaknesses of the study program. On one hand it offers invaluable information and insight on what works well and where the difficulties may lie, as well as how the staff is planning to improve the program. On the other hand, there may be blind zones which didn't reach the self-evaluation, and may therefore also be out of my reach. Especially perspectives of the students who either drop out of the program or spend several terms more than awaited may be forgotten. Additionally, I have utilized graduation rates from the Master's program in History at UiO, kindly provided by Marlene Holm.

Learning outcomes

The program's overall learning outcome seems to be very good: Students engage in different topics, with different approaches and generally archive above average marks. Based on the self-evaluation, previous students seem to be well-positioned within both the academic and non-academic job markets, suggesting that the skills and knowledge acquired during their studies are held in high regard. However, it would be advantageous to research the topic more structurally and compare the data with similar study programs.

Diverse learning outcomes is one of the most important benefits of the MITRA study program. By being exposed to a range of lecturers, specialists on different topics, the students are guaranteed a variety of themes and approaches. Further, variation in examination formats and

compulsory activities is valuable; it equips students with the ability to communicate in different genres, both written and verbal.

The self-evaluation discusses a plan to divide two of the second term's courses. While this could potentially address the issue of unclear communication amidst multiple lecturers in a singular course, it may pose new challenges. Rushing through six courses during one term could risk overwhelming students and not giving them enough time to think about the topics. Yet, the proposition of dividing the semester into two chronological blocks might make it easier. Alternatively, I would propose a larger course of 20 ECTS covering the topics. This course could give one lecturer a primary responsibility for overall execution and drawing lines between the different topics. In addition, the course could have several guest lecturers covering their respective fields, which could help maintain a variation in themes and perspectives.

I'm concerned about that students may not acquire sufficient theoretical and methodological tools in the beginning of the study program, as mentioned in the self-evaluation, and would propose the implementation of a "Theory and Method" course during the first semester. Correspondingly, I have an additional concern. Critical reflection over the impact of academic study, often referred to as critical, reflective, discursive, or post-colonial turn in the humanities, should be given more attention than in the material. In such a study program as MITRA, it is extremely important that students are cognizant of how academic studies can potentially impact the world, both positively and negatively.

Graduation rate

There is variation in the graduation rate from year to years, but the overall rate seems low. Only once, among the initial four cohorts, did over 50 % of the students graduate within the expected time, four semesters. If considering the overall graduation rate, only 59 % of students who began their studies in 2020 or prior had graduated by Autumn 2022. In comparison to the Master's programme in history, the graduation rates in MITRA are lower, yet they follow a similar trend. The self-evaluation from the history department suggests three potential reasons which may be transferable to MITRA: impact of the pandemic, the Master's programme has become more demanding, and delays in students starting their projects.¹ However, there occurs

¹ There are also other reasons which may cause students to prolong their studies: a need to work alongside studying, familial reason, and foreign students extending their study period in order to attain a residence permit. However, these are circumstances mainly out of the study program's reach and will thus not be discussed further. On the other hand, it should also be noted that the study program and internship opportunities could potentially

positive development between the first two cohorts, suggesting positive changes. I would recommend a thorough investigation into the changes made between these two cohorts, although this will not be discussed further in this evaluation.

Possible reasons for prolonged studies and low graduation rate

In terms of the pandemic, it might be the main factor contributing to the decreased graduation rates amongst the 2019-cohort. The graduation rate of the 2020 is higher graduation rate than that of the preceding cohort, but it is significantly lower than the graduation rate of the 2018 cohort, which, in fact, finished their fourth term at the beginning of the pandemic. This seems to suggest that while the lockdown may not have drastically impacted students working with their Master's thesis, it affected more negatively students in earlier phases of their studies. The assumption finds support in the data from the History department's self-evaluation.

When considering the suggestion of a more demanding program, it is important to remember that MITRA is still a relatively new study program; however, it might always have been inherently demanding. Differences between the cohorts suggest there being other factors as well. The History department's self-evaluation third point, that some students start working with their project later than before, should be considered. This delay is also mentioned in MITRA's self-evaluation, when discussing confusion about supervisory practices. I would argue that there may be more reasons leading to a delay: the third is mainly spent with other concerns, during which the lecturers have observed a diminished focus less on students' Master's projects. A potential solution could be to restructure the program, placing the field term as the final term and having students writing their theses already during the third semester. Such a reordering could allow students to work on their projects more continuously. This could potentially motivate students to complete their thesis in order to participate in the later field term, while simultaneously giving students in need of extra time the possibility of applying the final touch to their theses during the last term.

The self-evaluation identifies an unintentional under-valuation of the history project. Further, the self-evaluation suggests publications of good articles in *Fortid* as a pathway to heightened recognition. However, I am sceptical to the suggestion because every student already has the

aid students in securing relevant employment already as students. If this holds true, it signifies that the program offers advantages in job applications.

opportunity to get published in the journal. There is a section dedicated to research (“på forskerfronten”) and publishing in this section could contribute more positively than other sections.

Nevertheless, we must also consider that students attending an internship acquire invaluable contacts and experience which may exceed the value of publishing an article in a student journal. Another unfortunate disparity between the two paths emerges when considering their thematic focus. Students pursuing an internship may have the opportunity to work on their thesis theme, whereas students choosing history project are disadvantaged, not being able to work on their chosen theme.

Regarding the history project, I perceive its placement in the third term and its potential to explore a student’s chosen topic as beneficial. Instead of separating the history project and master’s thesis, MITRA could contemplate the possibility of a 60-ECTS master’s thesis for students who wish to combine archival research and their master’s thesis. The concept of offering different types of master’s theses isn’t unprecedented, as the Master program in history already has it. In my view, this proposed modification would not undervalue the 30-ECTS thesis; rather, it would promote better alignment with the alternative pathways offered by the field term.

Conclusion

There are numerous commendable elements currently present in the MITRA study program, and it would be regrettable not continue with them. The most prominent advantages are the diversity in learning outcomes, both in thematic and skill-based, as well as the field stay. Nonetheless, the program encounters some challenges. In this evaluation, I have aimed to propose potential modifications which, I hope, will assist the internal panel in further evaluating the program and identifying solutions.

Programme Evaluation Report

for the
Master of Arts (MA) in
Modern International and Transnational History (MITRA)
by
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Basis of the Report

This assessment is written based on the material provided by Oslo University and further investigation of the programme's webpages and other, related, and relevant MA degree programmes at Oslo University. As such, the material provided comprised an internal self-evaluation, course descriptions, lists of MA thesis topics and internship placements, as well as limited statistical overview of student numbers and their development over the course of both the MA degree's existence (since 2017) and within the two years study progress of the programme.

Overall Evaluation

The MA in Modern International and Transnational History (MITRA) is an excellent programme. It combines thorough disciplinary education with cutting edge historical research and pedagogical innovation. It delivers the goods. Overall, it is a programme, Oslo University can be proud of. As co-ordinator of the MA in International Studies at Aarhus University, I can deeply relate to the degree and can only applaud the team of coordinators and colleagues to a sophisticated, highly relevant, effective, and healthily self-reflective programme. The elements of MITRA all build on and relate to each other in meaningful ways and the results the programme has so far produced can also only be stressed as excellent. Graduates continue in prestigious, international research environments or stay in Norway; graduates are also qualified in ways that make them a resource for work outside academia; its staff is highly committed, and students display strong identification as a group of MITRAs.

Evaluation of academic environment and learning outcome

The way in which the course modules are aligned over the two-year study period is highly conducive to the defined study outcomes. Students are highly educated historians when they finish and at the same time highly adaptable to a job market outside the classical sphere of history, such as public administration, ministries, research institutes, broadcasting, and publishing.

The theses written by MITRA's graduates display a broad variety of historical perspectives. It is impressive to see the depth of expertise available at the department. The fact that thirteen and more colleagues are teaching within the course surely is among the reasons for this depth in MA thesis topics as is the international background of its students.

The learning outcomes are reached by the way in which the various modules interact. The high quality of MA theses and the high average grades of MITRA students are further reflections of the programme's strong academic environment, which comprises a mix of Norwegian and international faculty members and a highly international student body.

Importantly, MITRA is a programme, that, while attractive to international students, does not rely on them to remain a high-quality degree. Even if only Norwegian students were to enrol in the program, it would remain just as important, because of its high disciplinary quality and the

fact that graduates with an international outlook and a deep understanding of global complexities are a valuable resource for the Norwegian society.

From my perspective, MITRA clearly lives up to NOKUT's study regulations. The courses offered, the way in which they build on each other and the way in which they are taught and examined (a good mix of exam forms from oral exams to more applied assignments and the deep education in archive-based historical reading and writing), it is well thought through, highly aligned and fulfils the highest international standards.

Evaluation of relevance and quality

After talking to colleagues at other institutions in Norway and being able to have some knowledge about a benchmark when it comes to completion rates and drop-outs among MA degrees, it can only be concluded that MITRA is doing exceptionally well. The above-described factors – a well-thought through alignment of modules, a devoted teaching staff and a committed student body – work in the favour of high completion rates. On top of it, the average grades are also quite high, and I am sure that there is no culture of just dishing out As and Bs at the department, but that the academic performance of MITRA students is indeed exceptionally high. The overall quality of the programme is thus very high. In addition to comparatively high completion rates (which, seen from the perspective of pure numbers, could of course be higher), MITRA has a well-united student body. Faculty makes sure that social events and a spirit of shared curiosity and collegiality reigns through movie nights, common outings, and more. When it comes to assessing the relevance of the programme, it can be stated that, particularly in our contemporary world of interconnected crises of transnational and international character, a programme such as MITRA is a true asset.

Furthermore, the way in which graduates are educated seems to be effective when looking at the employment opportunities. While no full dataset is provided, the self-evaluation report lists several fields of employment for MITRA graduates. They are: further research on the PhD level, research in specialised institutes, employment in public administration, on communal as well as ministerial level, as well as in media and publication.

Reading the self-evaluation report, I was particularly impressed by the sincerity and deep level of self-reflection. They show a team of colleagues devoted to their programme. They are also self-critical and ready to change course content or exam forms based on feedback and shared experience should a better solution be found.

Recommendation

Regarding the question as to whether I recommend that the MA in International and Transnational History be continued or dissolved, my assessment is clear: it should be continued. This is a very good programme, indeed.

What I would like to offer here, however, is a commentary or feedback on the ideas presented in the self-evaluation report on pages 25 to 27. The author reflects on possible changes of the course structure and proposes a new organisation of the second term. It is argued that the course "Theories and Methods" should be replaced by offering four shorter modules on different fields of international and transnational history: economic, political, and cultural history as well as a module on core concepts. The argument is made that the course "Theories and Methods" is not adequate for an MA in history after all, that it looks good on paper, but is difficult in practice, because students expect a clear division between theory and or method, and the application of such methods to writing history. The division of theory and method and the seemingly simple possibility to isolate both, is not possible when writing history, the author exposes. Instead, history is a mishmash of everything at once, including the historian's own perspective in the middle of things.

This dismissal of theory and method as an extra course gives rise to the argument that specialised, smaller courses should be offered, illustrating the intellectual breadth of the department. In

addition, there should also be many more forms of exam. A total of six exam forms appears in the second term, from a newspaper article to a podcast and an oral exam. It is also argued that the introduction of four shorter modules allows for a good way to introduce members of the faculty and have many colleagues teaching in the course, so that students learn from a variety of different teachers and gain insights from a variety of perspectives.

While the difficulty arising from a course on theories and methods is explained in a convincing manner, the solution proposed seems to be very complicated. The second term now looks a little messy, with a lot of courses and a lot of exam forms. It is also not quite clear why such a rather radical change should be made to the programme when the self-evaluation report stresses frequently how good the programme functions. In addition, it is not explained why the course MITRA4300 on Global Encounters is cut from the programme. This course is a very interesting course that focuses on the strengths of global history, illustrating connections, transfers and reciprocities in the modern period. A very important course, it appears to me, specifically because the first semester is spent with introductions to key issues, the seminar on war and peace and reading and writing techniques. MITRA4300 is thus the only fundamental historical module in the programme, while the rest are introductions or specialisations. It is a module I perceive as central.

Instead of the proposed new structure, my suggestion would be the following: MITRA4010 on Methods and Theory should not be replaced with four shorter modules. A course on fundamental thinking about how to do and how to think about history is vital, however.

Therefore, my recommendation would be to turn it into a course on historiography. I would disagree with the slightly generalising comment by the author of the self-evaluation report that history is always simply a mishmash of things, a mix of questions, unsorted sources, unspecified methods, and no theory, relying solely on the interpretation of the historian. There is quite a distinct literature on what global history may be (for example in comparison to world history or now, increasingly, planetary history), there is a rich backlog of discussion and practice on doing international history and the discussions on how to carry out transnational history are vast. What MITRA, like any graduate programme, needs are elements that focus on deep disciplinary questions. Here, this would be a course on the historiography of international and transnational history. The suggested four shorter modules, which were supposed to highlight the department's variety and depth of scholarship, could become structural elements within the course on historiography, teaching cutting edge historiography in political, economic, and cultural as well as social history, together with general concepts and approaches that would open the course. Together with MITRA4300 on Global Encounters, where many examples for the historiography course could be found and could thus become tangible for students, this course on historiography would really equip the students very well with an understanding of how to carry out historical writing and, what is more, historical thinking.

I would also recommend keeping the amount of exam forms at a manageable minimum. While the old structure may have looked better aligned on paper than in practice, the newly suggested structure looks overly complicated and confusing. This, to my mind, could be remedied with the changes I suggest above. The reading course in the second semester could be on supplementary readings tackling questions of writing and thinking about history, for example touching upon foundational historiographical texts or introducing a select number of readings from varieties of historiography that may be inspiring to students (New Historicism, history of memory, use of history, gender history, deep history, new intellectual history, new diplomatic history, conceptual history, World Systems Analysis, planetary history, etc.).

Program evaluation report on the Master of Arts (MA) in International and Transnational History (MITRA) at the University of Oslo (UiO)

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November 21, 2023

Mandate

I have been asked to evaluate the MITRA program with respect to whether the learning outcomes in the program description have been achieved, whether they are well-formulated, and whether they are still relevant. Further, I have been requested to evaluate whether the program is relevant for the labor market and internationalization, whether it fosters a conducive learning environment, and whether it exhibits good completion rates.

To conduct the evaluation, I have been provided with a self-evaluation report with appendices, the program descriptions, and the course descriptions. In my final assessment, I am requested to recommend whether the program should either be continued in its existing form, with a focus on areas for further quality improvement, or be discontinued, and whether the courses it comprises should possibly continue within another program framework.

Overall assessment

According to the learning outcomes, the two-years master's program Modern and International History (MITRA) at UiO provides its students with "advanced knowledge in the field of international and transnational history and a deepened awareness for the global dimensions of modern historical processes." Furthermore, the students should have "required profound knowledge of methodological and theoretical approaches relevant for the study of international and transnational history" after having completed the program. A last learning outcome related to knowledge is that students are enabled "apply knowledge to current challenges within the field of international and transnational history."

These knowledge-related learning outcomes are well formulated and still highly relevant for modern societies. My evaluation confirms that all learning outcomes of the program have been achieved in the past. More specifically, I confirm that the learning outcomes are appropriate in relation to further studies at home and abroad and are highly relevant for the labor market.

Regarding further studies, MITRA provides students with an education highly relevant for doctoral study programs in the field modern history in all over Europe and beyond. Few Norwegian universities still require a 60 ECTS master thesis for admission to their doctoral programs, while the master's thesis within the MITRA program provides students with 30 ECTS. However, a 30 ECTS thesis means no hindrance for admission to doctoral programs at European universities in general. By means of its structure, the program thus puts strong

emphasis on internationalization in Academia. In addition, MITRA applies a broad and open approach towards international and transnational history in the individual courses. Content-wise, are educated in the relevant fields to conduct further studies within modern history more broadly.

Simultaneously, the program doesn't neglect the internal job market. MITRA provides students with many practical information and knowledge. It equips them with skills highly relevant in Norway. These skills include, among others, conducting an independent research project, identifying relevant source material in Norway and abroad, and presenting research results in English, orally and in writing.

Another of the program's strength specifically with respect to labor market is its focus on the practicability of the gained knowledge. In their fourth semester, students are required to take a field term, which means they either go on internship or write a lengthy assignment. The study administration helps students finding appropriate host institutions, which ideally are thematically related to the study program and relevant for their future careers such as state institutions or NGOs. For the other option, students are required to write an assignment based on archival research outside Norway.

Either way, with this element, the program puts emphasis on historical processes, events and actors that go beyond the Norwegian cultural and political borders while simultaneously providing them with meaningful knowledge relevant to the Norwegian society. Both alternatives—internship and history project—fit nicely with the third learning outcome cited above, as they enable students to gain knowledge on current challenges within the field of international and transnational history more broadly. Without any doubt, the field term provides students with skills relevant for the labor market and their future career.

The academic environment, the courses offered, and the composition of the courses enable students very well to achieve the learning outcomes. As cited above, the second learning outcome puts emphasis on methodological and theoretical questions relevant for the study of international and transnational history. That is reflected on the course level in so far as that students are currently required to take two courses on theories and methods in their second semester (MITRA4010 and MITRA4011). Based on the respective course descriptions, the two courses built nicely on one another. I will address challenges with these courses, as raised in the 2022 self-evaluation report, below.

MITRA exhibits outstanding completion rates. The self-evaluation report shows that of the 81 students enrolled in MITRA in 2017-2020, 53 students registered for the exam. Of those 48 students gained a master's degree. With a success rate of nearly 60 percent, MITRA students have performed very well academically in the last years. Such completion rate is impressive for a study program in the Humanities in Norway.

In the years after 2020, numbers were slightly declining. It is most likely that this was due to the global Corona-crisis, which affected students in their study process and learning outcomes

world-wide. It might thus very well be that completion rates from the 2021 and 2022 cohorts will recover.

The academic environment at UiO seems to be in such a state that students can achieve their learning outcomes. Based on the materials at hand, it is difficult to assess whether the program fosters a conducive learning environment. However, all indirect factors, such as completion rates and grades, point into this direction. These data can be used as an indicator for a very good and beneficial learning environment.

Recommendations

There is no doubt in answering whether this program should be continued or not. My verdict can't be clearer: A study program as successful as this should be continued.

When it comes to areas with further quality improvements, I would like to stress three points.

The self-evaluation report indicates that MITRA4010 and MITRA4011 in their current form cause confusion among students. That is, in short, because students have difficulties understanding the fluent boarder between methods, theories, and perspectives in the discipline history. Based on my own experience with teaching students in these matters, I do see the difficulty.

To solve the challenge, the self-evaluation report makes suggestions for changing the structure of the second semester. One result of the envision reform is that MITRA 4010 (Methods and Theory) and MITRA4300 (Global Encounters 1850–2010) merge to be then divided into four sub-courses each consisting of 6 meetings (it remained unclear to me whether a meeting refers to seminars or lectures and of how any hours a meeting consists of). The topics of these meetings are “concepts and approaches”, “politics”, “economy”, and “culture”.

While I understand the raised concerns regarding methods and theory, I feel sad for seeing MITRA4300 dissolved in the new structure. Based on the course description, MITRA4300 seems to be a highly relevant course for the overall program and learning outcomes. I would thus rather argue for keeping this course, not least because it didn't seem to cause any of the initial challenges.

What students learn in these sub-sections might be heterogeneous and difficult to compare. To which degree theory and methods will be integral part of each part or only of concepts and approaches, remained somewhat diffuse to me. If I understood the new structure correctly, the division into four courses also means splitting the cohort. If that is so ideally given that the cohort is in any case broken up in their third and fourth semesters, is questionable. It might support the learning outcomes and the overall completion rates more if students are able to develop a shared identity and identification with the MITRA program in their first two semesters.

Finally, I am afraid that students might feel overwhelmed by too many assessment forms (the plan foresees 6 different assessment options). In short, the suggested alternatives to replace MITRA4010 and MITRA4300 might cause more even more problems and confusion among students as the current structure.

For solving the initial problem with methods and theories, I was wondering whether it would make sense to teach the topic along historical lines. Methods and theories in the field of history developed over time. International history understood in terms of diplomatic history, for example, is prevailing much longer than transnational history that rose not before the early 2000s. The question of perspective is yet another one, but it can also be taught along historical lines (keywords linguistic turn, cultural turn etc.). All these are, after all, historical developments within the field. What if not the content changes too much, but the way it is taught? If these developments are taught as historical ones, the course would put strong emphasis on modern historiography in the field of international and transnational history. Could that be an option to solve the problem?

The second point I would like to suggest regards the knowledge-related learning outcomes. After having read through the provided material on which this assessment report is based, I found that the program could proudly add another learning outcome. I observed that MITRA provides students with a profound understanding of the historical causes of current global encounters. The program offers deep insights into historical processes and long-lasting developments behind present international and transnational interactions and challenges. If the first learning outcome (see above) was intended to address this, I recommend strengthening the argument.

The third point regards internationalization and responses to current Norwegian policies that most likely affect MITRA as well. MITRA emphasizes internationalization, both in terms of the content of the program and the recruited students attracted by the program. As it was part of my mandate, I assessed the point positively. The challenge, however, lies in the fact that current Norwegian policies point in the opposite direction. Starting in the academic year 2023/24, the Norwegian government introduced tuition fees for students from a country outside the EU/EEA and Switzerland. For MITRA, the costs for the academic year 2023/24 are at NOK 180,00 and for the academic year 2024/25 at NOK 191,000. These amounts are very difficult if not impossible to meet for a young person still under education.

It is thus most likely that MITRA in terms of application numbers will be highly affected by current Norwegian policies. Potentially declining enrollment numbers must be interpreted in the light of these external political factors, namely the tuition fees. Simultaneously, the question arises if the Department of Archeology, Conservation, and History together with Faculty of Humanities at UiO have thought-out concepts for how to support a highly successful study program such as MITRA in meeting these challenges.